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AUTHOR Huang, Su-yueh
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ABSTRACT

A study conducted in a freshman English class in a Taipei (Taiwan) university investigated how peer response groups functioned in their native language (Mandarin Chinese) and English, a second language. Analysis focused on (1) whether there were qualitative differences in the comments students made about peers' writing in the two languages, and (2) whether qualitative differences in interaction occurred during the peer response sessions. Participants were 35 students randomly assigned to English-language (L2) and Chinese-language (L1) groups, which were further subdivided into three- and four-student peer review groups. Results indicate that during the review session, the L1 group gave more specific comments than the L2 group, and the two groups emphasized different aspects of the compositions. L1 groups focused mainly on language usage, while the L2 groups dealt more evenly with language use, reasoning, and rhetoric. The former communicated more effectively, but the latter appeared more supportive of each other. Implications for teaching and research are discussed. (Contains 29 references.) (Author/MSE)

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# L1 or L2 in Peer Response Sessions? Differences in Verbal Interaction Between a Writing Group That Communicates in Mandarin Chinese and One That Uses English

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By

Su-yueh Huang

April 15, 1996

Tunghai University
Dept. of Foreign Languages & Literatures

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## ABSTRACT

Peer response is being used by writing teachers in Taiwan to help EFL university students do revisions. However, students may not benefit initially from peer response because they do not know how to discuss writing, either in Mandarin or in English. If the students use an L2, the quality of the discussion may suffer if they lack sufficient L2 skills.

A pilot study was conducted to examine how peer response groups function in the beginning stage. The research questions were: (1) Are there qualitative differences in the comments students make about peers' writing during peer response sessions between the group that uses Mandarin and the group that uses English? (2) Are there qualitative differences in interaction during peer response sessions between the group that uses Mandarin and the group that uses English?

The participants in this study were 35 students in a Freshman English class at a university in Taipei. The students were randomly assigned to an L1 (which used Mandarin in discussion) or L2 group (which used English), and then these groups were subdivided into groups of three or four. One peer response session was conducted and audiotape-recorded.

The study found that, during the session, the L1 group gave more specific comments than the L2 group, and the two groups emphasized different aspects of the compositions. The former communicated more effectively, but the latter appeared more supportive of each other. Teaching and research implications are also discussed in the paper.


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## Introduction

The efficacy of peer response as a way to help students revise their writing has been an issue of interest for many teachers and scholars in both the first (L1) and second/foreign language (L2) contexts. In the latter, it is especially controversial because L2 learners are often still struggling with the language they are learning. There are doubts whether these learners can work effectively in peer response sessions. Some teachers and researchers may even wonder if students would work more productively if they were allowed to use their L1 in the discussion. However, this issue is debatable because the use of the L1 may deprive the students of opportunities to practice the target language. Little research has been done on Chinese subjects; how Chinese L2 peer response groups function remains unknown in many respects.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the use of the L1 or L2 affected the way a group of EFL university students in Taiwan interacted when they responded to peers' writing in the initial stage of their training. It is hoped that this study will provide teachers with a better understanding of the learning processes of peer response groups.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Are there qualitative differences in the comments that students make about peers' writing during peer response sessions between the group that uses Mandarin and the group that uses English?

2. Are there qualitative differences in interaction during peer response sessions between the group that uses Mandarin and the group that uses English?

## Review of the Literature

In recent years, many researchers have examined how peer response groups function. Even though most of the studies were conducted with L1 learners, a few were done with L2 learners. However, there has been very little research done on the effects of the use of the L1 or L2 on students' performance at peer response sessions.

### Content of Discussion at Peer Response Sessions

Many studies have investigated what students discuss during peer response sessions. In the L1 context, Jones (1977/1978) classified the foci of students' comments into content, structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics (70% of the comments were devoted to sentence structure, diction, and mechanics). Danis' college sophomores (1982) addressed content, mechanics, organization, and language (constituting 36%, 20%, 14%, and 29% of the talk, respectively). In the L2 context,

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Dreyer's (1992) ESL writers were particularly inclined to comment on content. Huang's study of four EFL students at a university in Taiwan showed that, when students were requested not to focus on language errors, the aspect they commented on most was content. In descending order they also discussed structure and organization, tone and style, and clarity and coherence.

A few studies have also examined the degree of specificity students can achieve in their comments, since it is believed that specific comments facilitate revision more than general ones (Lynch & Klemans, 1978). In the L1 context, Gere and Stevens (1985) concluded that 5th-, 8th-, and 12th-graders' comments were more specific to particular texts and more attentive to the writer's intended meaning than the teacher's. Liner's study (1984) of 10th- and 11th-graders and Ritchie's (1983) study of junior high school students showed that students' responses became more specific over time. In the L2 context, Caulk (1994) also showed that the comments made by college ESL college students were more specific than the teacher's.

## The Nature of the Group Interaction at Peer Response Sessions

Many researchers have examined students' interaction at peer response sessions. To interact productively, students need an adequate metalanguage to discuss writing. Some L1 research has shown that students are able, after training, to develop a metalanguage to talk about writing. Gere and Abbott (1985) found that 5th-, 8th-, and 12th-graders used a significant amount of terminology to describe the forms of writing. They explored ideas of style and organization and discussed their habits of drafting and revising. Danis' (1980) college sophomores also created such a language in the group.

However, some L1 research has shown that students do not have the needed metalanguage. Ritchie (1983) suggested that even if junior high school students can sense what is wrong with the text, they may not have the linguistic tools or critical vocabulary to express themselves. Greene (1988) concluded that college students' comments were usually very general.

Besides a metalanguage, students also need the skills to work productively in the group. In the L1 context, Hoffman (1983/1984) noted that college freshmen possessed skills that allowed them to collaborate. Before discussing texts, the group of students dealt with anxiety, established a place and function for each member in the group, and established the authority of the group.

In contrast, some studies have shown that groups do not interact smoothly. In the L1 context, Danis' (1980, 1982) study of college sophomores found that a group without a leader would drift away from task. Danis (1980, 1982) and Spear (1988) both



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reported that students were often unsure of their roles and failed to engage in group discussions. Flynn's (1982) and Danis' college students (1980, 1982) were reluctant to critique peers' writing. Regarding L2 learners, Allaei and Connor (1990) showed that East Asian EFL college students also felt uncomfortable about criticizing peers' texts.

Regarding the atmosphere in the group, some L1 studies have shown that students can act in a supportive manner. Liner's study (1984) of 10th- and 11th-graders and David's study of college students (1986) reported that students offered more praise over time. The group functioned more as a body for support and a forum for sharing writings than as a panel for evaluation. Danis (1980) also found that college sophomores behaved tactfully and phrased their suggestions as alternatives rather than imperatives.

On the other hand, some studies have shown negative results. In the L1 context, Tebo-Messina's (1987/1988) college freshmen became hostile over issues of leadership and composing styles. Some students were so discouraged by the conflicts that they became less diligent in doing assignments. In the ESL context, Nelson and Murphy's (1992) study of college students found that one poor writer who received much negative criticism finally withdrew from group discussions. One female student who tactlessly attacked others' writing also caused some members to refrain from participating in group discussion. Similarly, Huang's (1994) case study of four EFL university sophomores in Taiwan showed that one of the four students acted defensively.

## The Role of the First Language in Second Language Learning

There has been little research on whether L2 students should use their first language or the target language when talking in peer response groups. However, some research has examined the issue of the role of the L1 in L2 learning in general. Many scholars believe that L2 learning is facilitated by whatever knowledge already exists in the learner's mental representation (McLaughlin 1987). They say that it is natural to assume that this knowledge would include what learners understand about the L1 and the cognitive capacity for problem solving developed through the acquisition of the L1. Klein (1986) has a similar view. He believes that the knowledge a learner can utilize to process linguistic input to analyze a second/foreign language falls into four categories, the first two of which are (1) general knowledge about the nature of human language and verbal communication, and (2) specific knowledge of the structure of the learner's first language or any other language. Thus the L1 seems to play an important role in the learning of the L2. Smith (1978) claimed that teachers should provide possibilities for relating the new facts of the target language to the world that is familiar to the learner via his/her native language and



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everyday experience.

The important role the L1 plays has caused a few researchers, such as Tarone (1977) and Ellis (1984), to examine the quantitative and qualitative differences in the communication strategies young learners use to tell stories in the L1 and L2. However, so far very few researchers have examined the effects of the use of students' L1 or L2 on their discussion at peer response sessions.

In summary, thus far there has been little research on the content and specificity of the comments made by Chinese EFL learners at peer response sessions, or on these students' interaction at these sessions, or on how the use of the L1 or L2 on these occasions affects students' performance. There is a great need for researchers to study these areas.

## Research Design

This is a qualitative study in which the researcher was also the teacher of the students being studied.

### Participants

The participants in this study were 35 Applied Psychology or Library Science majors enrolled in a Freshman English class at a university in Taipei. Their proficiency was at a high-intermediate level in comparison with other freshmen at this university. The study was conducted during 11 class periods (50 minutes each) spread over three weeks.

### Instructional Procedures

The students were asked to write persuasive essays. Three such essays were completed during the fall semester, in which this study was conducted. The peer response session for the second assignment was analyzed. The topic for this assignment was "Do Teachers Have the Right to Strike?" Before writing, the students read sample persuasive essays on other topics and then discussed in small groups the language and approaches to argumentation used in these essays. In addition, they read one English and two Chinese sample articles about teachers' right to strike and then participated in a prewriting group discussion about this issue. Then the students wrote their first drafts. Two days later they conducted a peer response session to give each other feedback.

Before the session, the students received training on how to respond to peers' writing. Guidelines were given in handouts. In two class sessions, the instructor demonstrated how to respond to both the micro (e.g., grammar, word usage) and macro aspects (e.g., organization, content, approaches to argumentation) of the



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writing. The students then practiced responding to their peers' drafts (those done for the first writing assignment) in a practice peer response session. Then a second peer response session was held to discuss the first draft of the second assignment. For this activity, 17 students were randomly assigned to an L1 group, which used Mandarin, and 18 to an L2 group, which used English. Both the L1 and L2 groups were further divided into five subgroups, each with two to four students. The session lasted 30 minutes. At the end of the session, the students recorded their comments on the drafts they read and then returned them to their peers for revision.

Data Collection Procedures

Two L1 and two L2 subgroups, each consisting of three students, were randomly chosen, and their conversations at the peer response session were audio-taperecorded. (These groups are referred to as L1A, L1B, L2A, L2B respectively later in this report). The first 25 minutes of the 30-minute session were recorded (there was only enough space on the tape for 25 minutes). In the analysis, the recording of group L2B had to be excluded because the students spoke in a low voice and their conversation was incomprehensible two-thirds of the time.

The researcher observed the students and took notes about their interaction immediately following the peer response session. The researcher noticed that some students in the L2 group occasionally switched into Mandarin. However, the researcher, after listening to the audiotapes of the two L2 subgroups, found that there were few instances of code switching and that it occurred mostly at the word level. If the language use of the unrecorded groups resembled that of the recorded ones, it is reasonable to assume that the effect of code switching did not seriously confound the results of this study.

## Results and Discussions

Analyses of the audiotapes and the researcher's observation notes led to the following findings.

Qualitative Differences in the Comments Made by the L1 and L2 Groups

A comment, defined as "a series of verbal exchanges between two interlocutors concerning one topic" (Chaudron, 1988) was the unit adopted for categorizing and quantifying the speech produced in the peer response session. For example, a participant might utter a few sentences concerning a certain element of a peer's writing, and these utterances were counted as one comment. The overall characteristic, focus, or function of these utterances was considered in categorization. When two interlocutors each took one or two turns to discuss a certain aspect of a piece of



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writing, the combined turns were considered as one comment. The comments made in L1A and L1B were compared with those of L2A. The foci and specificity of the comments are the two dimensions examined.

Foci of the Comments.

All of the comments, with the exception of those which had no specific focus, fell into the following five foci: (1) grammar or word usage, (2) mechanics, (3) the quality or legitimacy of an argument, (4) rhetoric (e.g., coherence, organization, a reasoning approach, substantiation of a major idea, paragraphing, transition), and (5) clarity of a sentence or a segment of a sentence. Table 1 shows the frequency with which each type of comment occurred in the discussion of L1A, L1B, and L2A. The types of comments in the feedback samples presented by the teacher in the instructional stage are also included to provide information on the nature of the instruction the students received. (Out of concern that the students may show a tendency to focus on language correctness rather than on more global elements, such as structure and content, the teacher dealt with both dimensions when she demonstrated how to respond to students' papers.)

Table 1
The Foci of the Comments Made by L1A, L1B, L2A and the Teacher

| Comment type | L1A | L1B | L2A | Teacher |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grammar & usage | 17 | 16 | 6 | 11 |
| Mechanics | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Argument | 1 | 2 | 5 | 12 |
| Rhetoric | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| Clarity | 2 | 0 | 5 | 1 |

This table shows that for both L1 subgroups, grammar and usage seemed to be the primary concern. The L2 subgroup's attention appeared to be more evenly spread among the various aspects of the texts. If the first two categories (grammar & word usage, mechanics) can be considered as related to language use, and the latter three (quality and legitimacy of argument, rhetoric, clarity) as related to rhetoric and reasoning, then the two L1 subgroups seemed to receive more feedback on language use than on rhetoric and reasoning. L1A had 20 comments on the former and 4 on the latter, while L1B had 18 on the former and 4 on the latter. In contrast, L2A's comments were more evenly distributed, with 9 on language use and 13 on rhetoric and reasoning.

In addition, the foci of the L2 subgroup more closely resembled those of the researcher (13 comments on language use, 19 on rhetoric and reasoning) than the L1 subgroups. The



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resemblance between the L2 subgroups and the teacher may be explained by the fact that the L2 subgroups were operating in a foreign language and that a feeling of insecurity might have caused them to closely model their instructor. This interpretation was reinforced by a comparison of the comments made by the L2 subgroups and the teacher. Many members of the L2 group actually imitated the teacher's wording. Apparently, the teacher's modeling had had positive effects on the L2 subgroup.

Specificity of the Comments

The students' comments were categorized either as specific or general. Examples are given below. In the following examples, the group from which the example is taken is indicated on the left; the category of the example is indicated on the right. The researcher's comments are enclosed in brackets [], and the translations of the students' utterances are in parentheses ().

[L2A] "I think this paragraph is good." [general comment]

[L2A] "I think your composition say your opinion clearly and orderly." [specific comment]

[L1A] "我覺得這裡 on 的用法很怪，莎士比亞時代有這種用法，現代沒有了。" (=I think the use of on here is strange. It was used in this way in Shakespeare's time. Nobody uses it now.) [specific comment]

In L1A, L1B, and L2A, the numbers of specific comments generated were 21, 22, and 7 respectively, while the numbers of general comments were 0, 2, and 13. Clearly, L1A and L1B offered more specific comments than L2A. For revision purposes, specific comments are supposed to be more facilitative than general comments (Lynch & Klemans, 1978). Therefore, the L1 groups appeared to receive more help for revision.

It is not surprising that the L1 subgroups offered more specific comments, since the students in these groups were not hindered by a language barrier, as the L2 subgroup was. The L1 subgroups, having had many years of schooling in their L1, should have developed a metalanguage to discuss L1 writing, and this could have been transferred to their discussion of L2 writing. The L2 subgroup, which had had no prior experience in conducting peer response in English, lacked an L2 metalanguage, and was therefore forced to make comments on a more general level.

Qualitative Differences in the Interaction Between the L1 and L2 Groups

The following discussion will focus on two dimensions: the atmosphere in the groups and the effectiveness of their communication.



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Atmosphere.

The interaction in both L1A and L1B was characterized by a feeling of familiarity, perhaps due to the use of the native language as a we-code. Two students in L1B ridiculed themselves over the mistakes they made or the activity they were engaged in. There were three such instances, two of which are shown below.

[L1B] "我是白癡。" (=I am an idiot.)

[L1B] "眞無聊，專挑錯字。" (=I am a bore, looking for trivial errors like misspellings.)

These two L1 groups seemed frank with each other, but they sometimes verged on being critical or unsupportive. These characteristics were conveyed both through the tone of their voices and the content of their comments. The following are examples.

[L1A] "你錯了。" (=You are wrong.) [critical comment]

[L1B] "寫得很普通。" (=This composition is so so.) [non-supportive comment]

There was never an instance of praise in either L1A or L1B. One of the students in L1A was very critical in his remarks and perhaps contributed most to the non-supportive atmosphere in this group. The researcher noticed that he also happened to be the one that challenged others critically in the prewriting discussion. This non-supportive approach seemed to be his usual way of interacting with this group.

In addition, the researcher's observation of the students showed that both the L1 subgroups appeared to be more relaxed than the L2 subgroup. There was continual exchange of ideas in L1A and L1B, while there were occasional pauses in L2A. The L1 subgroups thus seemed more lively than the L2 group. These findings seemed to be consistent with those from the tapes.

On the other hand, L2A was supportive, as evidenced by 12 instances of praise and two instances of members helping the others to find words to express themselves during the discussion. Ten of the praising remarks came from one group member, who contributed most to the warm atmosphere. The following are two examples.

[L2A] "Good argument." [praise]

[L2A] A: I think teachers strike to protect their right and_
For example, they need more money, more 福利 (=benefits)



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B: Welfare. [providing the closest equivalent B could think of to help A]

When the researcher observed the students critique each other's texts, she found that members in the L2 subgroup were better able to avoid confrontation by directing their criticism to the ideas presented rather than to the authors. Such an interaction style helped to create a warm atmosphere and avoid negative sentiment that might have arisen from the criticism of texts. Such a finding is consistent with those from the taperecordings.

The casualness and occasional bluntness exhibited by the L1 subgroups in the feedback sessions may have been a result of the use of the native language: this could have fostered a sense of familiarity and led the students to feel less need for polite expressions. Regarding the supportive atmosphere in the L2 group, it is possible that the difficulty of expressing themselves in a foreign language made this group more appreciative of their members' efforts, whether in writing the drafts or speaking in the group. Thus they might have praised their peers more to create a supportive atmosphere. In addition, when discussing in English, the L2 group could have been imitating the language of the teacher (who tried to build up the students' confidence in their writing by praising their efforts or offering tactful criticism). This is suggested by the high degree of similarity in expressions of praise used by the students and the teacher when praising.

However, it should be noted that most of the bluntness in the L1 subgroups can be attributed to the idiosyncratic style of one particular student who made many aggressive comments. Similarly, most of the instances of praise in the L2 subgroup were also made by one student, who contributed considerably to the warm atmosphere. Therefore, to a certain extent, the atmosphere exhibited in the peer response sessions could have been strongly affected by individual students. This observation mitigates somewhat the importance of the role that the choice of language played in the peer response sessions.

Effectiveness in Communication.

Learners in L1A, L1B, and L2A all expressed that they had difficulty in critiquing their peers' writing on both the local (language correctness, mechanics, etc.) and global levels (organization, content, etc.). For example, on four occasions, students in L1B stated that they did not know what was wrong with the language used in their peers' writing. Twice they turned to the teacher for the English equivalents of some Chinese words. In four instances, this group also indicated that they had problems responding to the reasoning, rhetoric, or the composition as a whole. L1A and L2A also mentioned difficulty in



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commenting on language use (1 instance in L1A, 1 instance in L2A). Their awareness of the difficulty is exemplified below.

[L1B] A: "我沒辦法改文法。" (=I can't handle grammatical errors.)
B: "我也沒辦法。" (=I can't, either.)

[L1A] "你確定這個形容詞的用法？我不知道該怎麼講？" (=Are you sure of the usage of this adjective? I don't know how to say it.) [Unable to decide whether the word safe could be placed before the word feelings as a modifier]

Sometimes the students give incorrect suggestions to their peers, thus indicating the responders' own lack of competence in using the target language. Two examples follow.

[L1A] "Change into Nothing serious happens for the teachers to have the right to strike." [Changing a grammatically inaccurate sentence into an equally inaccurate one]

[L2A] A: I think teachers strike to protect their right and_ For example, they need more money, more 福利 (=benefits).
B: Welfare. [Providing an inaccurate word in an attempt to help A express himself]

Compared with the two L1 groups, the L2 group was less effective in their communication; the latter was hindered not only by a lack of skill in analyzing writing problems but also by the difficulty of using a foreign language to express themselves. L2A's difficulties in communication are described below.

1. Occasionally, when providing feedback, the students failed to point out precisely what was wrong with an element in the composition. Instead, they offered a very general or even vague comment, which offered little help for revision. This is shown below.

[L2A] A: I think [laughter] your composition this sentence is_ is no use. [laughter]
B: [Laughter] Good, good.
A: Do you agree?
B: Yes, I agree.
A: Good. It's nonsense. [lack of specificity]

2. Sometimes a student's limited vocabulary led him/her to rely heavily on one or two words of a very general nature to describe some successful element in a piece of writing. The following three instances show the same student using the word good almost exclusively for this purpose.

[L2A] "Good, good." [Responding to the author's defense of her idea]



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[L2A] "We think this composition is so good."

[L2A] "Very good." [Responding to the author's explanation of why she used a certain expression]

3. Sometimes miscommunication occurred due to the failure to find the right words to discuss writing. This indicates the students' lack of an adequate metalanguage to function in peer response sessions.

[L2A] A: We think this composition is so good. [lack of specificity]
B: But I hope you can give me some ideas that I_ _ _ didn't noticed.
A: Er_ I think this paragraph "But remember please" seems so over 太口語化 (=colloquial), not a formal spelling [miscommunication, the speaker talking about spelling when meaning to say informal language use]. In one sentence you show two verbs, 兩個動詞，不像正式作文 (=two verbs, informal language use) [laughter]. Not so_
B: So what?
A: [Laughter] Formal.

4. Sometimes a speaker attempted to explain a point but abandoned the effort after an unsuccessful attempt. This again shows how the lack of an effective metalanguage hurt the performance of the students.

[L2A] A: What do you mean by bad emotion? Can you get this straight er clear definition?
B: Bad emotion is student should be should be_ _ _ er [sigh] should had his lesson and_ had has he should_ _ _ O. K. [abandoning attempt]
A: And_ _ _ in Line 8, you said teacher is selfish what_ I think it's better to be er_ _ _ ? 這怎麼辦？ (=How shall I express it?) [expression of difficulty]
B: Is there any question? What do you want to express what? This teaching is a_ [laughter] [failing to understand A]

5. Sometimes, when attempting to explain a difficult point, the speaker simply repeated what he/she said in an almost-verbatim fashion, instead of trying to rephrase their remarks or present their views in new approaches so that the others could understand.

[L2A] A: You say teachers want to have more rights to protect their lives. But I think_ _ _ they just want more protection for their work, not rights to protect their lives. Do you know what I mean?
B: [laughter] No. [incomprehension] Please say again.
A: In Line 10 you say_



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B: Wait. Line 10.
A: You say teachers want to have more rights to protect their lives. But I think this is not the main reason that they go on strike. I think they just want more protection, their work, for example_ _ _ [failure to try a new way to explain]
B: For example I think_
A: They just want to_ _ _ [abandoning the attempt to explain]
[End of A's comment]

In the above analysis, the tape of L2B was not included because, due to poor sound quality, most of the discussion was unintelligible. However, what was reflected in the few comprehensible segments seemed to be consistent with the above description. In this group, the turn-taking was very slow. There were frequent long pauses, unfinished sentences, and much difficulty in finding expressions. There was one instance of code-switching and one expression of the difficulty of critiquing peers' texts. The members' low voices strongly indicated a lack of confidence. When the researcher circled around the room, she noticed that the L2 subgroups seemed to lapse into silence more often than the L1 ones and were less certain of how to proceed. Some L2 subgroups even code-switched occasionally.

## Conclusions

Even though this is a pilot study that may have some limitations, the following conclusions drawn from it may bring insights for teachers and researchers.

An analysis of the students' comments at the peer response session shows that the L2 subgroup offered fewer specific comments than the L1 subgroups. An examination of the students' interaction also indicates that the L1 subgroups seemed to communicate more effectively. This may suggest that the use of the L1 has facilitative effects on students' learning. Even though such use may decrease the amount of time students have to practice the target language, it may make the learning more manageable for learners with no prior experience in doing a task as challenging as peer response. The rationale behind this is consistent with the views advocated by supporters of bilingual education, such as Cummins (1980) and Guthrie and Guthrie (1987), who believed that use of the L1 to scaffold learning of the L2 can facilitate learning and foster confidence.

The data also show that the two language groups had different emphases when providing feedback: the L1 subgroups focusing mainly on language use, while the L2 subgroup dealt more evenly with language use, reasoning, and rhetoric. The latter's way of responding is believed by many scholars and teachers--such as Sommers (1980) and Hayes, Flower, Schriver, Stratman, and



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Carey (1987)--to be more productive. The L2 subgroup's foci also resembled those of the teacher (who wanted to steer the students away from error hunting) more than those of the L1 subgroups. The differences between the two groups seem to indicate that the teacher's modeling of what aspects to focus on when critiquing writing had more positive effects on the group that used the target language.

The findings show that the atmosphere in the L2 group appeared to be more supportive than that in the L1 group, as evidenced by the former's greater frequency of praise and group collaboration in finding words to express ideas in English during the discussion. Again, this resembled the supportive behavior of the teacher, indicating that the L2 group imitated the teacher's behavior more closely than the L1 ones. Apparently, the teacher's modeling promoted more productive behaviors in the L2 group.

The above findings may seem somewhat contradictory; some suggest that the use of the L1 is more productive; while others point to the opposite. However, this seeming contradiction may not hold up on closer examination. The L2 group, in imitating how the teacher modeled responses, was able to react to those elements of writing that the teacher reacted to and also to praise their peers as often as the teacher did. However, an analysis of the L2 students' comments shows that they were both more general and lacking in depth, compared to comments made by the L1 groups. Therefore, on the superficial level, the L2 group may have been able to cover more aspects of writing and act more supportively when responding, but it was not as able to make in-depth comments. Even though teacher modeling produced some desirable effects, this modeling still seemed inadequate for students who had received peer response training for only a very short period of time.

It is not surprising that the L1 groups communicated more effectively than the L2 ones, since the former had no language barrier. The considerable difficulty the latter exhibited seemed to indicate that students who have no prior experience with peer response need much training, and on a long-term basis.

## Implications

The findings of this study suggest that the L1 subgroups produced more specific comments at the peer response session and were also more effective in their communication, while the L2 subgroups experienced more difficulty in pinpointing writing problems and expressing themselves. Since many skills are required in the successful critique of peers' writing (e.g., analysis of writing problems, metalanguage, group interaction skills, and knowledge of group procedures), teachers who are training students with no prior experience may consider allowing



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use of the L1 to a certain extent in the initial stage, so that the students are not overwhelmed by the task. The extent of L1 use could decrease as the students acquire more skills.

In this study, the L1 subgroups appeared to focus most of their attention on language correctness when they responded to writing. Students need to learn to analyze both the local and global aspects of the texts, rather than simply hunt for language errors. This is particularly important when they are responding to first drafts in which the authors may still be exploring for ideas.

The data indicate that the teacher's modeling of responding had positive effects. This suggests that the students in the L2 groups imitated the teacher's responding style by providing comments that dealt with both the micro and macro levels of the discourse and by interacting supportively. Writing teachers can use individual or group conferences with the students to demonstrate ways to respond. Teachers can also use written comments to maximize the modeling effect. In addition, they may monitor peer response sessions carefully and discuss in class the problems the students encounter. However, since this study shows that the students in both language groups still had difficulty with responding, teachers should be prepared to model for an extended period of time.

Since some students may act in a critical or tactless manner in the groups--and thus inhibit the working relationship among the students--teachers should instruct their students how to be supportive. They need to respond to not only the weaknesses but also the strengths of peers' writing. They should also appreciate the risks their peers take to share writing and therefore act in a constructive and encouraging manner. Students can form groups to examine their performance after each peer response session in the initial stage of training. A debriefing session can then follow to allow the groups to share their feelings and learning processes with the whole class.

This study did not examine the revisions the students actually made in response to peers' comments, in either the L1 or L2. In the future, these revisions should be assessed to determine whether the language used in providing feedback (i.e., in the L1 or target language) results in any differences in the students' reactions or in the quality of the revisions they subsequently make.

This study attempts to provide helpful information for teachers who want to use peer response. However, this study has its limitations. It was a pilot study, and the small sample size (the researcher sampled only four of the ten peer response groups) should be kept in mind. In the analysis of the observation notes, the researcher did not use any coding scheme, which could have



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enhanced the objectivity of the analysis. In future research, the sample size and duration of the study could be increased. Also for the purpose of triangulation and obtaining richer data, another researcher could be asked to observe the class. In-depth participant interviews could be adopted, as well, to provide additional insights into students' feelings about peer response sessions and the use of the L1 or L2 at these sessions.



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